

March 16, 2015

Dear Chair Roblan and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Lisa Laser and I am the mother of two dyslexic children, Ellis Ransdell, now a freshman at Franklin High School, and Lilah Ransdell, a 6th grader, at Sunnyside Environmental School, both in Portland, Oregon. It is time to realize the problem before us has a solution. We can and must change how we teach dyslexic children. We must catch it early and provide the teaching they need to feel safe, respected, honored, and self-confident.

My son, Ellis, loved kindergarten. I could not have asked for a lovelier, more wonderful teacher than Mr. Huckaba at Winterhaven in Portland, Oregon. He loved his teacher, his friends, and he loved going to school knowing the first thing he would do was run and dance around the auditorium while his teacher blasted music. Ellis wanted to go to school even when he had a 102 degree fever; he cried not to be kept home.

In first grade those tears meant, "Don't send me to school." We had moved in July 2005 to Joseph, Oregon. There his teacher believed in work sheets and art projects where the students were told to put an exact number of green sponge leaves on their brown sponge tree trunks. "Are you sure it's not a math assignment?" Ellis' dad asked me.

Thirteen days into the school year his teacher called us in for a meeting. She told us Ellis needed to repeat kindergarten, that he was immature (his artwork reflected this) and he wasn't reading. All incoming first graders could read we were told. And, she continued, his DIBELS scores showed he was below benchmark. Our family's story is the prologue, "DIBELS: One Family's Journey," in the book, *The Truth About DIBELS: What It is, What It Does*. In my family's case it was used to see a boy as a set of numbers: numbers that inaccurately labeled him. To fail to see that difficulty with phoneme recognition didn't mean he needed to repeat kindergarten but that he needed trained, qualified teachers who could help him with his dyslexia, was a failure of his teacher, the principal, and the state of Oregon.

Ellis did not repeat kindergarten. When we asked the first grade teacher what other options we had, she said, "He can repeat first grade." Repeating grades is not beneficial to a student. In fact it can be detrimental to their self-confidence and well-being. It would never have made sense to him. Using immature to describe a just turned 6-year-old is like complaining your ice cream isn't hot. After that we home schooled for 4 years.

Fast forward to a freshman in high school. Nothing has changed. He struggles in school. He has not had Special Education teachers who could help him with dyslexia because they have known little or nothing about it. This school year I had to have, “Cannot be forced to read out loud in class,” added to his IEP. I have had to fight for accommodations. His IEP gives accommodations that help him complete his work but does help his basic weaknesses. Because there is no understanding of dyslexia, either in special education or the general classroom, there is no meaningful understanding of my son and all the other dyslexics. It means he continues to be significantly below grade level in reading and writing/spelling. This problem gets worse in high school because of the number of teachers he has and the number of students the teacher has.

I do believe he can do better. But it is not about working harder or studying longer hours. It is about self-advocating to be heard and understood. It takes an enormous amount of strength not to think you are stupid, or lazy, or useless when you are dyslexic. It means teacher education and early diagnoses and help for students at an early age. It means changing the law and the way we teach. The “one size fits all” model is anathema to the success of our children.

His sister, Lilah, is also dyslexic. She has not gotten the help she needs at Portland Public Schools. She has teachers who want to help her but do not have the training or support to make a significant impact on her dyslexia. Schools need to be able to hire people now to help families get the assistance they need. Currently, it comes down to can your family afford private tutoring? Most cannot. So now we have an equity issue as well as a learning disability.

There are methods already being used that work to make the world of letters and words more accessible. It is not a cure. There is no cure. If the ODE implements teacher training to catch the signs of dyslexia early (K-1) and begin helping dyslexics feel worthy, confident, and smart for life then we will succeed not just in teaching dyslexics but taking away the stigma of being a struggling student. Albert Einstein was called “mentally slow.” Muhammad Ali was called, “dumb.” My son was called, “immature.” Dyslexics are neither, slow or lazy, but their brains are different and that means teaching them appropriately, not shaming them.

Please support Senate Bill 612 and bring equity to our classrooms.

Thank You,
Lisa Laser